

## Boosters and Businessmen: Popular Economic Thought and Urban Growth in the Antebellum Middle West

ISSN 0003-4827

No known copyright restrictions.

---

### Recommended Citation

"Boosters and Businessmen: Popular Economic Thought and Urban Growth in the Antebellum Middle West." *The Annals of Iowa* 46 (1982), 382-384.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.8880>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

and "The Lawmakers and Lawmaking," where less complex methods of analysis are employed, the author's presentation reads smoothly. In later chapters, however, *Representative Democracy*, much like *The Indiana Voter*, demands considerably more of the reader. A thirteen-page "Appendix on Sources and Notes" relieves the text of some of the burden of describing Campbell's methods and the problems inherent in their use.

In an attempt to prevent any further widening of the gulf between professional historians and the largest possible reading public, Campbell may wish to consider making greater use of such appendices in future works, thereby encouraging as many students of American history as possible to avail themselves of the products of the new political history. With the publication of *Representative Democracy*, as well as of his several journal articles of the 1970s, Ballard Campbell has advanced the development of the new political history and has established himself as one of its leading advocates.

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

THOMAS G. RYAN

*Boosters and Businessmen: Popular Economic Thought and Urban Growth in the Antebellum Middle West*, by Carl Abbott. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981. pp. xii, 266. Appendices, bibliography, index. \$27.50.

The idea of the American West as the locus of the sturdy yeoman farmer, resident in the "Garden of the World," is being revised by historians of the urban frontier, especially for the period up to 1830 by Richard Wade in *The Urban Frontier, 1790-1830*, (1959). And now Carl Abbott has continued, in a narrower thematic context, the story of the rise of the middle western city up to 1860 with careful case studies of the economic growth of Cincinnati, Chicago, Indianapolis, and Galena, Illinois. Since Wade found so much of early middle western urban development derivative from eastern experience it is interesting that Abbott discovers vigorous local initiative central in the conceptualization and implementation of growth in these frontier cities. The focus of his comparative studies is the relation of boosterism, the process by which business and civic leaders assessed the situation they faced, tried to define an economic program to be carried out by public and private action, and publicized that assessment and program to local and national audiences," to development. Because the exuberant rhetoric which often characterized this publicity has established itself in our folklore as the empty puffery of parochial Chambers of Commerce and archetypal small-town Babbits, it is a bit surprising that Abbott finds boosterism,

despite its sometimes unabashed flamboyance, to be essentially rational analysis of open commercial possibilities. In the best instances, he says, booster-thinking was channeled into realistic urban growth strategies which transcended the self-interest of the individual publicist.

Still the Middle West was, *par excellence*, the region which viewed development in materialistic terms of rapid money-making, unlike the East which could stress cultural progress and the South which concerned itself with the political aspects of economic growth. Newsmen, magazine editors, and authors of gazetteers and guidebooks coalesced into "articulate leadership groups" which publicized opportunities to investors and could mobilize local citizens in the process of formulating and carrying out development plans. The content of this boosterism, Abbott shows, is most commonly a mixture of realistically conceived advertising together with an overarching "affirmation of the great destiny and mission of the American people." Whether the mania for compiling statistics supplemented by impressionistic reporting floated in a frothy stream of rhetorical assertion can very often be dignified as "economic thought" appears questionable. But perhaps the more basic problem in assessing city growth is what casual priority might be assigned to popular ideology, however cogent it may have been, in relation to more fundamental physiographic and economic determinants. Even though he carefully attempts to measure rhetoric against reality, Abbott, in zeroing in on popular perception of growth potentials, may underplay the more structural underlying factors fundamental to growth.

Nevertheless, in relating booster rhetoric to the collective mentality of leadership in his cities, Abbott has demonstrated an important but variable role for popular ideology in focusing, or failing to focus, efforts toward adaptive perception and exploitation of growth options. The failure of Cincinnatians to maintain the vigor and coordination of their development activities, as seen in the aimless duplication of their transportation planning, Abbott sees as one factor permitting Chicago to forge strongly ahead of the Queen City in the immediate antebellum years.

Common themes in boosterism were supplemented by local adaptations of varying success. The most successful promotional strategies were developed in Chicago and Indianapolis in the 1850s. Chicago stressed the advantage of its location for commercial development. Indianapolis emphasized the importance of railroads and its geographic centrality as the foundation for the promotion of political and social service activities. Cincinnati, on the other hand, with the aging and prosperity of many of its early opinion leaders, drifted into

complacency in the Fifties. Galena, increasingly drawn into Chicago's orbit, tried vainly to fix upon new directions after the end of the lead-mining bonanza.

A subordinate theme which emerges from *Boosters and Businessmen*, in both popular thought and reality, is the importance of manufacturing in a period which has been seen as primarily an era of the growth of regional commercial centers. Another theme is the evolving configuration of the cities' commercial hinterlands and the close congruence of popular perception of hinterland extension with objective statistical evidence. It is clear that ideas of the nature and extension of trade areas were themselves significant factors in shaping patterns of commercial penetration. Local thinking of this matter did not so much emerge in the abstract as calculation of the most efficient gathering of the elements of production. It rather pointed to the potentiality of creating in space the equivalent of dependent political empires in the hinterland. Thus aggressive promotional thinking vigorously implemented could operate, in some measure, as self-fulfilling prophecy.

Although one cannot fault Abbott's selection of cities, other than possibly the choice of Galena, it would be instructive, where sources exist, to supplement his view from the larger city, with a study of the role of boosterism in a sample of smaller towns, those which flourished and those which declined precipitously or disappeared. How was boosterism manifested in these locations? Was it as typically instrumental or did delusionary miscalculation of opportunity more frequently result in ill-conceived growth strategies? In any case, Abbott has shown that optimistic vision and practical nerve, the American Dream of Success, must be reckoned in these years as vital driving forces, along with more structural determinants of economic growth and decline, in the early urbanization of the Middle West.

CORNELL COLLEGE

STUART A. STIFFLER

*Indian Traders on the Middle Border: The House of Ewing 1827-54.* Robert A. Trennert, Jr. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981. pp. xvi, 264. Endnotes, bibliography, index. \$17.95.

*Indian Traders on the Middle Border* is a welcome addition to the literature on Indian-white relations. Using the fortunes of the mercantile house of Ewing, Robert Trennert examines the Indian trade on the midwestern frontier from 1827 to 1854. The book fills a lacuna in historical scholarship for, as the author points out, the Middle Border has not received the attention given to other American frontiers.

Copyright of *Annals of Iowa* is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.